

AMERICA'S Mallet Maker – THE EPILOGUE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKE BALTER

BY PAUL BUYER

One of the proudest moments of my personal and professional life was seeing Mike Balter inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame. Mike, one of the kindest and most generous human beings I know, was my first percussion teacher. While in high school, I was fortunate to take lessons with him. Mike introduced me to PAS and what the society means to every drummer, percussionist, and educator. He also gave me a great opportunity for over 25 years to work his booth at PASIC, where I established lifelong friendships.

I am grateful to *Rhythm! Scene* editor Josh Gottry for asking me to write this interview article as a tribute to Mike for all of us who know him as well as for the wave of young percussionists who may not be aware of the profound impact he has had on our field as a player, educator, and industry leader. If there is one lesson I learned from Mike Balter that stands out, it's that *PAS is about the people*. In Mike's case, this couldn't be more true.

Paul Buyer: Tell us a little about your music education and primary teachers.

Mike Balter: Like most students, I started playing drums in grade school, immediately finding a love for drums and percussion. My private teachers read like a who's who of percussion: Roy Knapp, Louie Bellson, Lou Singer, Jose Bethancourt, Bob Tilles, Al Payson, and Bobby Christian. I earned my undergraduate degree in Music Performance and Music Education along with a Master's in Music Education at DePaul University, and I have a Doctor of Music Education degree from VanderCook College of Music. My teaching experience includes DePaul University,

Governor's State University, and The American Conservatory of Music.

PB: What did you do professionally before Balter Mallets?

MB: I was doing it all: concerts, recordings, TV and radio commercials, nightclubs, theaters, and teaching. I had the pleasure of performing for the Broadway National Touring Companies of *A Chorus Line*, *Pippin*, *Dancin'*, *Annie*, *Evita*, *They're Playing Our Song*, *Jerry's Girls*, *Beatlemania*, *The Wiz*, *Joseph*, *Dreamgirls*, *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, *Grand Tour*, *Pirates of Penzance*, *42nd Street*, and *Cats*. I played with numerous talented stars such as Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Barry Manilow, Bette Midler, Dionne Warwick, the Pointer Sisters, Nancy Wilson, Pearl Bailey, Johnny Mathis, Melissa Manchester, Andy Williams, Steve and Eydie, Bobby Vinton, Eddie Fisher, The 5th Dimension, and many, many more.

PB: How has percussion changed in the past 5–10 years, and what innovations and developments do you envision in the future?

MB: During the past 10 years or so, it is not as much that percussion instruments have changed as much as the players themselves have changed. Today's players have more dexterity, skill, and overall ability than players of 20 or more years ago. What was played in college 25 years ago is now a standard piece for high school students. I attribute much of the skill and "chops" of today's players to marching and front ensemble playing.

However, today's players need to be aware of two factors that have



decreased in the past 10+ years: musicality and sight reading. Maybe because of the volume needed in outdoor playing environments, players seem to have lost some of the musicality or nuance of the music. Are they just playing the notes or are they playing the music? Do today's players use and take advantage of all dynamic levels or are they playing only *mezzo forte* or louder? And in today's world, one could question if sight reading is becoming a lost art. Sight reading is so important, so I am concerned that students are not doing it often enough.

PB: *Talk about your service on the PAS Executive Committee as Treasurer.*

MB: Serving on the EC was truly an honor. I am extremely proud to have served 16 consecutive years as Treasurer on the PAS Executive Committee, helping to guide the society into what it is today. Together with the outstanding leaders on the EC, we accomplished a great amount during those years. To name a few, PAS moved to Lawton, Oklahoma and began several new programs, created a percussion museum, re-invented the chapters and Days of Percussion, enhanced the PASIC experience, and established an online presence. Subsequently, in my last years as Treasurer, PAS outgrew Lawton and moved to Indianapolis, Indiana.

When I first became the Treasurer, the society was 20-thousand dollars in the red, and when I left the office PAS had assets of over two million five hundred thousand dollars. Serving on the EC, one must see the big picture and do what is best for PAS and the membership without being self-serving. As a member of the Board or the EC, one quickly learns that PAS is much more than a convention [PASIC]; PAS

has something to offer its membership 365 days a year. All percussion students should be members of PAS in order to help expand their knowledge and experience in the percussive arts.

PB: *What are your plans moving forward?*

MB: Now that I am retired, I can do many of the activities that I have wanted to do for many years, including lots of travel! I also would like to get back to playing, and doing some teaching and clinics. Over the years, I've had to turn down clinics and speaking engagements while running Balter Mallets. Now that I have the time, I already have clinic dates lined up for this year. I'm not sure exactly what the future holds, but I do want to work with and mentor the next generation of players and instill in them the passion that I have for drums and percussion.

PB: *Describe your experience at PASIC18. How was the Balter Artist Gathering, and what was it like not manning your booth for the first time?*

MB: Selling Balter Mallets to the Zildjian Company in 2018 was one of the best business decisions I made. Zildjian

is truly a family business! They treat their artists, employees, and everyone associated with the Zildjian Company [Zildjian, Vic Firth, Balter Mallets] like family. For 41 years, I worked hard to establish Balter Mallets as the leading percussion keyboard mallet brand. Knowing that the Balter name will continue under Zildjian gives me personal pride. They will take the brand to the next level.

At PASIC18, Zildjian hosted a Balter Artist Gathering, which was very warm and friendly, as the Zildjian leadership formally welcomed the Balter artists. The Balter artists are in very good hands with Zildjian, as that gathering reinforced the concept that artists are part of their family. It was nice seeing so many friends at PASIC18. Not having to be in the booth all day as in years past, I was able to attend clinics and concerts. There are so many talented players today; the future of percussion is extremely bright.

PB: *How would you describe your legacy in the percussive arts?*

MB: This is not an easy question to answer. Maybe I should let you decide if my legacy is that of being a good

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player, America's Mallet Maker, or just a nice guy who liked drums and percussion.

However, if one were to ask me what I did for percussion, I would probably answer that I expanded the color palette for the keyboard percussionist. Prior to Balter Mallets, the commercially made mallets were available in hard, medium, and soft with rubber, yarn, or cord heads. I felt that your sound is your musical signature, and that sound needed to be the best it can be. In order to achieve that, percussionists needed more musical colors to express the music they were playing. By expanding the musical color palette, I was able to provide percussionists the tools that they needed to create their sound.

Expanding the color palette for every mallet player is what I *have done* but I also think that part of my legacy is *why I did it*. As a young student (16+), while working at Franks Drum Shop, I became friendly with leaders of the percussion industry: Remo Belli, Avedis Zildjian, Armand Zildjian, Bob Zildjian, Bill Ludwig Sr., Bill Ludwig Jr., Don Osborne, Ben Strauss, Lloyd McCausland, Lenny DiMuzio, and many others. As the years went on, I was able to call each of them my friend. Each of them answered my questions about drums and percussion and were so kind to me that I knew I wanted to pursue the percussion business in addition to being a player. In the early days of Balter Mallets, I would look back upon my relationships with the who's who of percussion, and I felt it was my responsibility to treat the next generation as I was treated. Which is why, even to this day, I will always find time to speak to students at conventions, online, or on the phone.

While I was playing around Chicago, I started making my own mallets in order to create the more musical sounds I was hearing in my head. Conductors and other players remarked on how I sounded lyrical rather than having that vibe "ball-peen hammer" sound. As the word got out, I was getting calls from percussionists in Chicago,

New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas to make mallets for them. It was then that Balter Mallets was started. The new company was growing very quickly. I was receiving inquiries throughout the country from students who wanted to buy mallets as well as drum shops who wanted to stock Mike Balter Mallets.

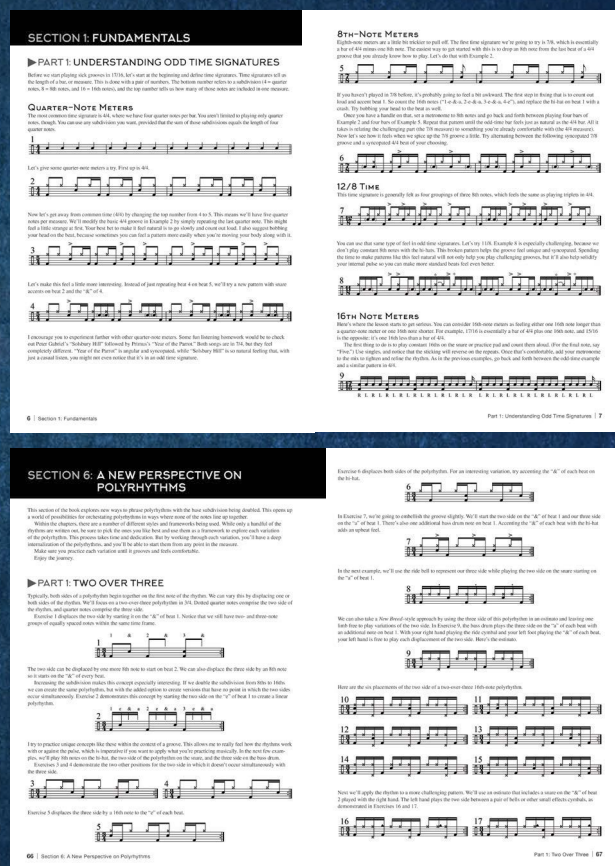
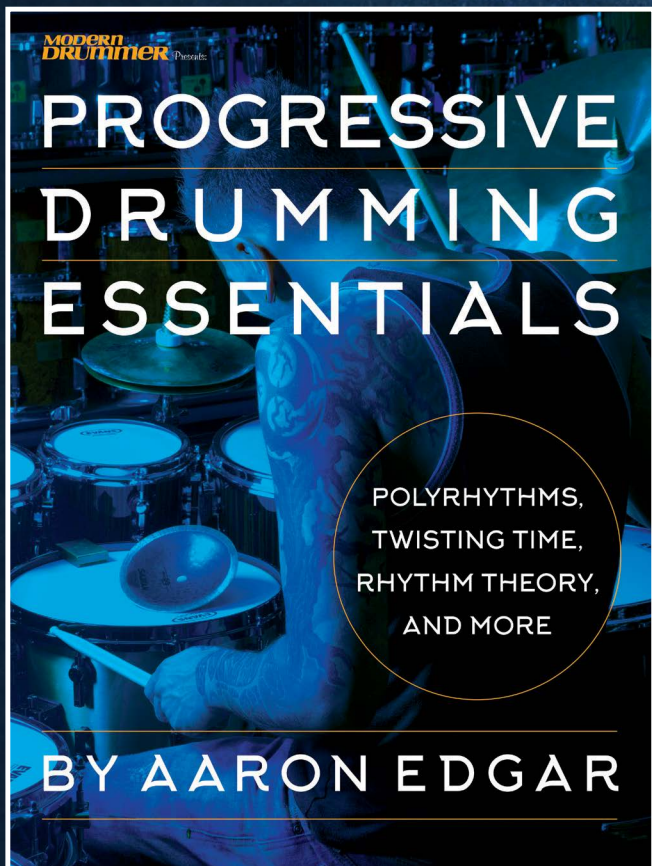
What I find somewhat amusing is that while in college I always thought I would make a name for myself as a player, not a mallet maker. In fact, six months after I started the company, my friend and teacher Louie Bellson was in town, and we went to see Mel Lewis, who was playing with the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Big Band. During the break, Mel came over to our table and Louie said, "Mel, I want you to meet my friend Mike Balter." Mel looked at me and said, "Hi, oh...you're the guy making those great mallets!" After growing the company and going international, people started referring to me as America's Mallet Maker.

For over forty years, having been fortunate to work in the music industry and play with great artists and hit shows, now that I am retired, it is time for me to pay back and help the new generation of percussionists reach their potential and goals.

Paul Buyer is Director of Percussion, Director of Music, and Professor of Music at Clemson University. He is the author of *Working Toward Excellence*, *Marching Bands and Drumlines*, and co-author of *The Art of Vibraphone Playing*. He is a contributing author to the second edition of *Teaching Percussion* by Gary Cook, and his articles have appeared in *American Music Teacher*, *Teaching Music*, *Jazz Education Network*, *Percussive Notes*, *Rhythm! Scene*, and *The PAS Educators' Companion*. Dr. Buyer serves as Co-Content Editor for *Percussive Notes*. **RIS**



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